Dutch celebrate fall harvest with Kermis in Little Chute

Dressed in Dutch garb, Nellie Vander Wielen, Jacci Schmuacher, Heather Werner and Jolene Van Roy are right at home in this setting inspired by the 'old country' —in this case, Holland. Post-Crescent photos by Bob Baeten

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LITTLE CHUTE — When a group of Dutch settlers took to this little village some 140 years ago, members of the community brought with them many of the customs and traditions native to their homeland.

One of those traditions, the annual Kermis — or harvest festival — was continued for many years in the new setting, but fell by the wayside as the years passed. The celebration was rekindled a few years back by a creative Little Chute Middle School teacher, Pat Poupore, and has since become a festive fall event on the streets of this still predominantly Dutch area.

This year's Kermis festival will be held Saturday night at the Main Street/Grand Avenue intersection in downtown Little Chute. The outdoor celebration begins at 6 p.m. with the traditional "washing of the streets," featuring middle school fourth- and fifth-graders, in Dutch costume, literally scrubbing the streets in the old European way.

The street cleaning is an ideal way to begin the celebration, according to Poupore, because "the washing of the streets would precede any kind of event in Holland. In fact, washing the streets was a daily activity for many of the people who settled here from Holland. They're very, very clean." Even today, many Dutch people continue the practice by washing the steps and walkway in front of their homes on a daily basis.

Before the renewal of the harvest celebration, the last big Kermis in Little Chute was in 1948, marking the 100th anniversary of the Dutch settling in the village. The original celebrations were massive affairs which sometimes lasted for several days.

Watry's Bar on Depot Street, its location for many decades, served as headquarters for the Kermis. "The guys would go out hunting and bring in their animals to Mamie Watry, who would cook and serve the food," according to Poupore. "The people would come to the party eat and dance all night. Sometimes the Kermis lasted for two or three days" in a grand hall on the upper level of the building.

Though today's celebration lasts only six hours — until midnight — it is designed to be every bit as festive and every bit as Dutch-inspired as those of a century ago — with a touch of 1984 thrown in. A committee headed by Paul Renkens, Todd Vanderloop, Norm Coenen and Poupore has planned a roster of entertainment sure to please the elders of the community who attended the original Kermis festivals, on down to the youngsters of the village who may be coming to the celebration for the first time.

The entertainment will begin with the street washing and Dutch dancing by village youngsters under Poupore's direction. It will continue with a performance by break dancers, the St. John "Sing for Joy" group, the Little Chute High School jazz band and the musical combo Hoppy and the Gopher.

New to the modern version of the Kermis, an honorary king and queen will be crowned to oversee the festivities, as had been the custom at such festivals many years ago.

Food plays an integral part in virtually every celebration, and the Kermis is no exception. According to Norm Coenen, the menu will feature such Dutch delights as Erwtensoep (pea soup), Hutspot Met Klapstuk (hodgepodge with boiled meat) and Knakworst Met Zuurkool Opeen Broodje (knockwurst with sauerkraut on a bun).

Andy Dickman, Todd Verboomen and Mark Schommer take charge of street sweeping duties, an old Dutch custom.

The Post-Crescent Sep 19 1984